Review: Derek Hastings, Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism: Religious Identity and National Socialism

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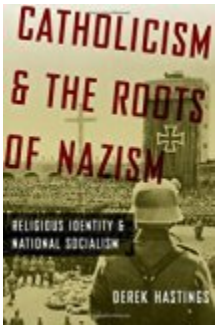

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Was the Early NSDAP a Confessional Party?

Given the growing number of studies charting the complicity of segments of the Protestant lay and clerical leadership with National Socialism, it comes as no surprise that historians are also turning up skeletons in the closet of Germany's Catholic community. What is surprising about Derek Hastings's monograph is the time frame he charts for Catholic complicity with the Nazi movement. Whereas the course of Protestant entanglement appears as an ascending line through the final phase of the Weimar Republic, Hastings argues that Catholic involvement with the Nazi movement was substantial and even critical in the first years of the movement, until relations soured in the run-up to and aftermath of the "Beer Hall Putsch" of October 1923. Thereafter both the NSDAP and the Catholic Church were happy to sweep the memory of this interlude under the carpet.

Hastings begins his study by alerting the reader to the peculiarities of Catholic politics in Bavaria, and particularly in its capital. Although predominantly Catholic, the voters of Munich gave the Center Party a scant 15.9 percent of their votes in the Reichstag election of 1912. After the war, many Munich residents remained downright hostile to the "political Catholicism" of the national Center Party and the local Bavarian People's Party (BVP). The reason for this lay, in part, in Catholic strength. With a Catholic monarch and with a largely Catholic population, Bavaria had not suffered–in the words of a local journalist writing in 1922–from the "confessional nervousness," "anxious feelings of inferiority," and "combative party-consciousness" (p. 17) that the *Kulturkampf* had engendered among Catholics up north. Munich supported a broad spectrum of Catholic religious and political positions, including "perhaps the most energetic and vehement forms of Catholic anti-ultramontanism in all of Germany" (p. 19). Particularly important for Hastings's story in Munich is its resident Ignaz von Döllinger, the Catholic theologian who, in the 1860s, opposed the ultramontane course steered by the Vatican. Döllinger was excommunicated in 1871 for his association with the breakaway "Old Catholic" movement.

Hastings then sketches out the network of Catholic organizations and individuals that opposed the Bavarian Center Party in Munich before the First World War. Most prominent were the Christian Social movement, which was influenced by the antisemitic posturing of Viennese mayor Karl Lueger, and "Reform Catholicism." This latter movement was founded in 1900 and led initially by the priest Josef Müller, who combined antisemitism with elements of Döllinger's more liberal nationalism. Müller called "the evolution of German Catholics into a closed political party … the most serious national catastrophe imaginable!" (p. 31). For Müller the "political Catholicism" of the Center Party weakened both nation and religion by dividing the former and sullying the latter through political compromise.

Reform Catholics launched several important journals, including *Renaissance* and *Hochland*. Their political position, like that of Döllinger a generation earlier, found favor in circles close to the Bavarian court. The fa-

ther of Heinrich Himmler, a tutor to the royal family and later a *Gymnasium* rector, was a representative figure in these circles. Crucially, Reform Catholicism found adherents among Munich's Catholic university fraternities. It offered students a doctrine that was at once nationalistic, interconfessional, and Catholic. There was, in other words, a specific Bavarian Catholic tradition of "positive Christianity," a concept that the National Socialists promoted so effectively after 1918. Hastings dates the term "positive Christianity" back to 1903, when it appeared in another Reform Catholic journal *Das 20. Jahrhundert*. Unfortunately, however, Hastings does not pinpoint the meaning of the term at that time, nor does he determine Reform Catholicism's place in the genealogy of Nazi usage.

After the war, many Catholic nationalists looked to the BVP as a replacement for the now largely defunct Reform Catholic organizations. But under the radicalizing pressure of the Bavarian revolution of 1919, some, like the publicists Dietrich Eckart and Franz Schrönghamer, turned against the BVP and joined the NSDAP. By mid-1919 Eckart and Schrönghamer had become key contributors to the *Völkische Beobachter*. It is well known that this newspaper was owned by Rudolf von Sebottendorf, an active figure in the post-Protestant and deeply anti-Catholic Thule Gesellschaft, which gathered esoterically minded Pan-Germans. Yet Hastings convincingly shows that with Sebottendorf's departure from Munich, Eckart and Schrönghamer were able to pursue an editorial policy that was friendly towards Catholicism, even as it was extremely hostile towards political Catholicism.

Between 1919 and 1922, an increasing number of Catholic priests, Catholic intellectuals, and Catholic fraternity members became involved in the Nazi movement. Hastings implies that the key factor distinguishing the NSDAP from many *völkisch* groups in Bavaria was that the NSDAP was a de facto Catholic organization, while the others were de facto Protestant. He points out the lack of condemnation from Munich cardinal Michael von Faulhaber for the antisemitism of the movement. Indeed, Faulhaber gave succor to Catholic antisemitism by his own suggestion at the 1922 *Katholikentag* that "racially pure Catholics" were opposed to the "hereditarily tainted" Republic of Weimar and "the Jewish press in Berlin" (p. 104).

When the National Socialist saboteur Albert Leo Schlageter was executed by the French occupiers of the Rhineland in May 1923, he quickly became the object of a Nazi cult of veneration. National Socialists staged a series of rallies and commemorative events celebrating Schlageter that emphasized his deeply held Catholic beliefs. This is proof for Hastings of the "Catholic-Nazi synthesis" of the summer of 1923. A number of Catholic clergy, most prominently the abbot Alban Schachleiter and priests Josef Roth and Philipp Haeuser, conducted religious services at these rallies. Hastings argues that this clerical support was a key reason for the success of the NSDAP's summer membership drive that saw the party's number rise from 20,000 to 55,000 members.

Hastings offers two explanations for the subsequent collapse of the Catholic-Nazi cooperation. First, emboldened by Benito Mussolini's successful "March on Rome," Hitler switched his tactics and entered into an alliance–the Kampfbund–with Protestant and pagan *völkisch* groups in order to seize power. The first Protestant pastors began to speak at Nazi events in September 1923. The extreme anti-Catholicism of some members of the Kampfbund, General Ludendorff in particular, led to friction between the Catholic Church and the NSDAP. On November 4, 1923, just four days before the Beer Hall Putsch, Cardinal Faulhaber expressed his sympathy for "our Israelite fellow citizens" in the atmosphere of mounting racism. This address set the stage for "confessionally based divisions" (p. 142) that emerged after the attempted coup, the failure of which many putschists blamed on Faulhaber.

The second reason that Hastings gives for the replacement of Catholic-Nazi tolerance with outright hostility was the rise of the messianic cult around Hitler, which developed notably after his release from Landsberg prison in 1925. Drawing on Eric Voegelin's theory of "political religion," Hastings argues that National Socialism was itself becoming a quasi-religion that could breech no competition from the churches. Although intriguing, the appearance of this thesis at the end of the study is a bit awkward. Such an assertion begs for more substantiation.

Hastings's accomplishment is to have uncovered a network of Catholic activists in the Nazi movement. The design of the study makes it difficult, however, to gauge the significance of this network and its activities. The first problem regards the use of the term "Catholic." Hastings states at the outset that his study "is not so much an investigation of Catholicism per se, or of the Catholic Church as an institution, but of the role played by individual Catholics ... within the Nazi movement" (p. 6). Yet, by leaving the church and its teachings out of the scope of the book, the author undermines his own liberal use

of the terms "Catholic-oriented" or "Catholic-inflected" to describe any utterance made by a Nazi who also happened to be a practicing Catholic. Just what makes most of these utterances "Catholic"? This question largely remains unanswered.

A second difficulty emerges from the decision to examine Catholic Nazis in relative isolation from other political, social, and religious forces and organizations. This means that Hastings's study can only partially contribute towards the liberation of German Catholicism from its historiographical "ghetto" by connecting it with wider German political and religious history, a desideratum identified some years ago by Oded Heilbronner.[1] By showing the pluralism of Bavarian Catholic politics, Hastings deals a blow to the idea of a single Catholic milieu dominated by the Center Party. However, I would have liked to learn more about the linkages that surely existed between the anti-ultramontane Catholics and other Munich-based non-Catholics, from Protestants to the *völkisch* pagans. For example, Hastings identifies parallels between *Kulturprotestantismus* and *Kulturkatholizismus*, but does not examine the interaction of these two streams of liberal theology. Similarly, we want to know more about the importance of racial hygiene to the thought of men such as Schrönghamer. Did their Catholicism make their scientific racism different from that of other radical nationalists? Here some comparison to the theological positions of the German Christians or other Protestant groups would have been useful.

More contextualization would have helped readers gauge the significance of Catholic Nazi activism to the wider intellectual and political history of both National Socialism and Catholicism. What was the balance between Christian and anti-Christian forces in the Nazi movement and how great was the synthesis between the two? And what about the Catholic community? Without a proper overview of the politics of the Bavarian church as a whole, Hastings leaves the reader to wonder just how representative and relevant the handful of Nazi priests were.

Despite these caveats, this volume was a provocative work that sheds light on an underexamined aspect of the history of National Socialism. Its most valuable insight was that the NSDAP may have initially benefited from a de facto confessional identification with Catholicism even as it polemicized against political Catholicism under the banner of a supraconfessional "positive Christianity." This development opened the movement to German Catholics who wanted to overcome confessional division without betraying their own Catholic identity. After the conflicts of 1923, Catholicism and Nazism became more difficult to reconcile.

Note

[1]. Oded Heilbronner, "From Ghetto to Ghetto: The Place of German Catholic Society in Recent Historiography," *JMH* 72, no. 2 (2000): 453-95.